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ABSTRACT

This analysis discusses 5 elementary schools in the District of Columbia that have demonstrated significant educational improvements in less than 6 months after the implementation of the Community for Learning (CFL), a collaborative project initiated between the Office of the Superintendent of D.C. Public Schools, the Laboratory for Student Success, and the 5 schools. The overall goal of this collaborative effort is to establish a network of schools to demonstrate the feasibility and effectiveness of implementing the CFL program. Implementation of the CFL during this first year focused on the classroom instruction component, the Adaptive Learning Environments Model (ALEM), which is a classroom instructional and management delivery system that gives specific guidance in implementing an inclusive instructional approach that provides for student diversity in regular classes. Through the ALEM model, students receive individualized support from an instructional team made up of classroom teachers and specialist teachers. Students of all levels of ability receive appropriate instruction without experiencing the negative effects of ability segregation. A total of 142 staff members from the 5 schools participated in the implementation process, which took place for 3 cohorts of teachers in the 1996-97 school year. They were able to initiate program implementation immediately after their initial training, and many achieved moderate to high implementation within 6 months. Evaluation at 6 months showed students spending more time in small-group activities. A significant correlation was found between level of program implementation and positive results in terms of teacher attitudes. Initial findings also indicate an overall positive pattern of improvement in student achievement, with gains in reading achievement test results, and positive changes in the achievement rankings of the five CFL schools when compared with all other elementary schools in the District. (SLD)

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Change takes time, or so conventional wisdom tells us. This would seem to be the case particularly for grave societal problems like low levels of academic achievement of children in urban schools located in neighborhoods characterized by extreme poverty. But for five low-achieving public schools in the District of Columbia, significant improvements were apparent less than six months after the initial implementation of the Community for Learning (CFL), a collaborative project initiated between the Office of the Superintendent of the D.C. Public Schools, the Laboratory for Student Success (LSS), and five D.C. elementary schools.

The overall goal of the collaborative project is to establish a network of schools to demonstrate the feasibility and effectiveness of implementing the Community for Learning program, a comprehensive approach to urban school reform that strives to unite the expertise and resources of school, family, and community to foster the success of every student. The five elementary schools were identified through an intensive planning process by the D.C. Office of the Superintendent and the senior staff of the D.C. schools based on the District's student achievement database for 1994-1996. In addition to being among the lowest performing elementary schools in the District, the selected schools had also shown a continuous pattern of decline in student achievement over the past three years.

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

Implementation at the five demonstration schools during Year 1 focused on the classroom instruction component of the CFL program, known as the Adaptive Learning Environments Model (ALEM). ALEM is a classroom instruction and management delivery system that gives specific guidance in implementing an inclusive instructional approach that provides for student diversity in regular classes. Through the ALEM model, students receive individualized support from an instructional team made up of classroom teachers and specialist teachers (e.g., special education and Title I). General education students, students labeled on the basis of mild-to-moderate disabilities, and academically gifted students thus receive appropriate instruction without experiencing the negative effects of ability segregation.

The D.C. Public Schools provided a full-time project coordinator to oversee the implementation at the five demonstration schools and to serve as a liaison between the District and the LSS. In addition, a facilitator was provided for each of the five schools to assist principals and teachers in achieving a high degree of implementation. The coordinator worked closely with LSS staff to design and execute plans for professional development and technical assistance. A pre-implementation assessment for each school identified staff development needs. Pre-implementation training took place during district-designated staff development days, so that teachers were not pulled out of their classrooms.

A total of 142 staff members in the five D.C. demonstration schools participated in the implementation process, which took place in three cohort groups of teachers during the 1996-97 school year. Attention was focused on the following questions:

- Is it feasible to establish schoolwide implementation of the CFL program during the first year of the program initiative?
- To what extent does CFL implementation lead to positive changes in the patterns of classroom processes and behaviors of teachers and students?
- Does implementation of the CFL program lead to changes in teachers' perceptions about their school learning environments?
- Can CFL implementation lead to improved student achievement after less than six months?

INITIAL FINDINGS

Findings from the first year of implementation fall under five headings: (a) degree of program implementation

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of the instructional component; (b) patterns of changes in classroom processes; (c) relationship between degree of implementation and classroom process; (d) teacher perceptions; and (e) student achievement.

With respect to degree of implementation of the instructional component, the school staff were able to initiate program implementation immediately after receiving pre-implementation training. Many staff achieved a moderate to high degree of implementation within less than six months.

A concomitant pattern of positive changes was also reported in classroom processes and teacher-student behaviors. As shown in the figure at the right, students were observed to spend increasingly more of their class time working in small groups (19.7% vs. 47.3%) and less time (21.1% vs. 54.6%) working in whole-class situations when pre- and post-implementation data were compared.

To determine the extent to which positive changes in the patterns of classroom processes and behaviors are attributable to the degree of program implementation, a multiple correlation analysis was carried out using the results from classroom observations and degree-of-implementation data. A significant correlation was found between level of implementation and positive results, validating the program design in terms of both feasibility and positive impact. Perhaps more importantly, this correlation provides reassurance to the school staff that their efforts have resulted in observable, positive changes in their classrooms.

Significantly, teachers expressed positive perceptions about their ability to provide for student diversity and were generally encouraged by the positive changes, which they had not thought possible. It was the consensus among principals and program facilitators that "a kindred sense of accomplishment was evident among the staff."

Initial findings indicate as well an overall positive pattern of improvement in student achievement:

- CFL students showed gains on the Stanford 9 reading achievement test (see table below).
- Positive changes were noted in the achievement rankings of the five CFL schools when compared with all other elementary schools in the District.
- Students who were in the program for a longer period of time (first cohort) performed better than their peers with less time in the program (second and third cohorts).

Given these encouraging findings, there is reason to believe that the first year of planning and implementing the CFL comprehensive approach to school reform has been successful. The results suggest that the schools participating in the collaborative project are engaged in a significant reform action. These findings also support the notion that it is possible to initiate a comprehensive school reform model such as the CFL program in urban schools faced with some of the most challenging circumstances.

The hard work and commitment from staff, principals, program coordinator, and facilitators are the key to the positive pattern of preliminary results. These early successes prove that, while school reform requires hard work, significant changes do not necessarily take a long time.

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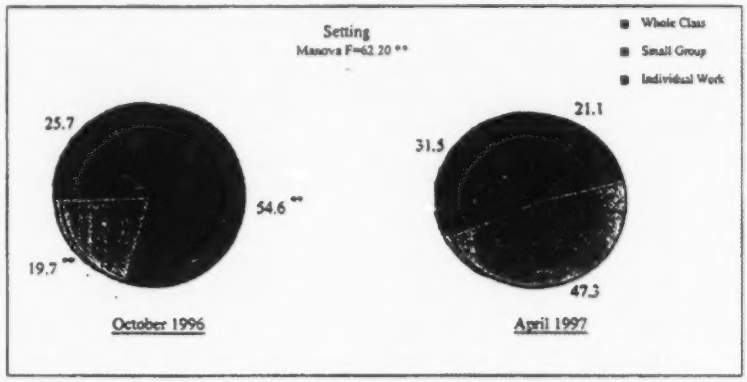
For more information about the Community for Learning program, contact the Laboratory for Student Success at 800-892-5550.

Figure
Observed Student Behaviors Across All 5 Washington, DC Schools



** A Statistical Test of the Difference Between April 1996 and October 1997 was significant at p<.01.

Table
Percent of Students Who Scored Within Each Performance Standards Level (Stanford 9 Reading, Fall, 1996 and Spring, 1997)

Performance Standards Levels	CFL Schools			Districtwide*		
	Fall	Spring	Change	Fall	Spring	Change
Below Basic	50.9	41.1	-9.8**	33.4	42.6	9.2**
Basic	37.1	41.3	4.2**	43.1	38.1	-5.0**
Proficient	10.6	15.9	5.3**	17.8	15.3	-2.5**
Advanced	1.4	1.7	0.3	5.7	4.1	-1.6**

*Excluding scores for the 5 CFL schools
** $p < 0.1$

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